DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 133 136 RC 009 623

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TITLE Family Attitudes Among Mexican-American and Anglo-American Parents in San Jose, California.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anglo Americans; *Child Rearing; Comparative Analysis; *Cultural Background; Cultural Differences; Educational Background; *Family Attitudes; Interviews; Marital Status; *Mexican Americans; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; Religion; Socioeconomic Background
IDENTIFIERS *California (San Jose)

ABSTRACT

Home interviews were used to investigate the degree to which Mexican American parents have retained traditional Mexican family attitudes and childrearing practices. Respondents were 118 Mexican American and 148 Anglo American parents, residing in the same working-class neighborhoods in San Jose, California, who were married to persons of the same cultural background and had at least one young child. The typical respondent was a young mother who did not work outside the home and had four children. Mexican American parents were predominately second generation Americans. Interviewers were undergraduates; bilingual Mexican American students interviewed Mexican American respondents. Presented in three sections, the interviews gathered data on their: background, i.e., the number of children, religious affiliation, number of years of formal education, occupation, language spoken at home, country of birth; attitudes toward close family ties; and parent-child relations, i.e., the rules the child was expected to follow, child's chores, parent's ways of punishing and rewarding the child. After statistically controlling for differences in socioeconomic status, it was found that Mexican American parents (1) felt close family relations were more important and visited their relatives more often and (2) encouraged similar family-centered attitudes in their children by restricting where they played and with whom. (Author/NQ)

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rec 28-01-77

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FAMILY ATTITUDES AMONG MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND ANGLO-AMERICAN PARENTS IN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

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Presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association in Los Angeles, California, April 1976.

RC009623

Abstract

The present research used home interviews to investigate the degree to which Mexican-American parents have retained traditional Mexican family attitudes and childrearing practices. Respondents were 118 Mexican-American and 148 Anglo-American parents residing in the same working-class neighborhoods in San Jose, California. Undergraduate students acted as interviewers. Mexican-American respondents were interviewed by bi-lingual Mexican-American students. Parents selected were those who were married to persons of the same cultural background and who had at least one young child. The typical respondent was a young mother who did not work outside the home and had four children. Mexican-American parents were predominately second generation Americans. After statistically controlling for differences in socioeconomic status, Mexican-American parents in contrast with their Anglo-American neighbors, felt close family relations were more important and visited their relatives more often. Mexican-American parents appeared to encourage similar family-centered attitudes in their children by restricting where their children played and with whom.

FAMILY ATTITUDES AMONG MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND ANGLO-AMERICAN PARENTS IN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA[1]

In recent years much attention has been focused on identifying causes of the lower economic and educational achievements of Mexican-Americans compared with Anglo-Americans (e.g., Uhlenberg, 1972; Kagan & Zahn, 1975). Researchers such as Penalosa (1968), Carlos and Sellers (1972), McGinn, Harburg, & Ginsberg (1965), Rosen (1962), and more recently Kagan and Carlson (1975) have proposed that differences in family structure and/or childrearing practices may be at least parital explanations for discrepancies in economic and school achievements. Achievement motivation, for example, is assumed to result from parental training of standards of excellence and independence.

There is research evidence to suggest that the Mexican family places a greater emphasis on obedience and less emphasis on independence or self-reliance than the Anglo-American family. Rosen (1962), for example, found the Brazilian mothers when asked to indicate the age at which they expected their sons to display independence in areas such as making friends and deciding how to spend their money and what clothes to wear expected their children to be independent at later ages than did American mothers within the same socioeconomic class. Further, twice as many Brazilian (26%) as American boys (13%) described their mothers as telling them what they can and cannot do most of the time (Rosen, 1962). Consistent with Rosen (1962), McGinn et al. (1965) found that Mexican students more frequently described their mothers as strict and as discouraging disagreement.

Another characteristic of the Mexican family (Carlos & Sellers, 1972) closely related to the encouragement of dependence is an emphasis on close family relations. McGinn (1966) has proposed that Mexican mothers not only

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[1]The research was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation to Sandra L. Kirmeyer, Grant No. GY 9575.

control their children's thoughts more than Anglo mothers but they also exert more control over the movements of young children. Children are encouraged to play at home with siblings rather than with other children in the neighborhood, thus promoting close emotional ties between siblings (McGinn, 1966).

Observed differences between Mexican and Anglo-American parents do not necessarily translate into differences between the Anglo and Mexican-Americans. For example, Madsen and Kagan (1973) found that when mothers worked with their children on an experimental task, Mexican mothers responded to their children's performance in less punitive and more rewarding ways than did Anglo-Americans. However, Mexican-American mothers did not differ significantly from their Anglo-American counterparts. Contrary to the Mexican mothers, Mexican-Americans tended to be more punitive than Anglo-Americans.

Mexican-Americans may be more similar to Anglo-Americans than to Mexicans in their childrearing practices for two reasons. First, observed differences between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans may be more closely related to urbanization and economic class than to cultural background (e.g. Kagan & Carlson, 1975). If it is the case that urbanization and economic factors rather than culture are the causes of previously observed Mexican and Anglo-American differences in childrearing practices, then Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans residing in the same neighborhoods would not be expected to differ in any significant ways. Second, acculturation may quickly erase any initial disparity between cultural groups. Grebler, Moore, and Guzman (1970) provided some evidence that Mexican-American and Anglo-American workers do not differ in achievement orientation. With regard to their work, Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans expressed similar desires for job advancement, higher income, job security, and for jobs which are intrinsically rewarding (Grebler et al., 1970).

The present research was designed to provide data on two questions related to the broader issue of the degree to which Mexican-Americans have retained the traditional Mexican family attitudes and childrearing practices: Do Anglo-

American and Mexican-American parents who live in the same neighborhoods and experience similar urbanization and socioeconomic class differ in attitudes toward close relationships within the family and in their encouragement of dependence in their children? Are the differences in the directions which would be expected on the basis of descriptive literature on the Mexican family?

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 118 Mexican-American parents and 148 Anglo-American parents residing in the same working-class neighborhoods in San Jose, California. Neighborhoods selected for sampling had high concentrations of Mexican-Americans and median incomes comparable to the median for the United States as a whole. Once the neighborhoods had been selected, undergraduate students canvassed the areas on a door-to-door basis to obtain a complete list of all potential respondents. Such a thorough and very expensive procedure for generating the pool of potential respondents was necessary because only a small portion of the residents within the neighborhood met the requirements of the study, whose purpose was to examine the effects of cultural background on parental childrearing practices and on the parent-parent relations within the family. Thus, it was necessary to select only those parents who were (a) Anglo-American or Mexican-American (determined by family surname), (b) married to a person of the same cultural background, (c) living with their spouse, and (d) had at least one child between the ages of six and twelve years.

Respondents were drawn from a pool of approximately 1600 eligible Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans. From these potential respondents, 250 Mexican-Americans and 250 Anglo-Americans were randomly selected. Of those selected, 61 percent of the Anglo-Americans and 56 Percent of the Mexican-Americans were interviewed. Usable interviews were obtained from 148 Anglo-Americans and 118 Mexican-Americans. Interviews were discarded primarily because it had become evident to the interviewer that the respondent was not married to a person of

the same cultural background.

Of the respondents, 82 percent were women. The average respondent was young ($\bar{X}$ age, 35 years), did not work outside the home, had nine and one-half years of formal education, and had four children. The Mexican-American parents were predominantly second generation Americans (47%), that is, their parents were born in Mexico and the respondents were born in the United States; 36 percent of the Mexican-Americans were born in the United States and had parents who were also born in the United States (later generation Mexican-Americans). Only 17 percent of the Mexican-Americans were first generation Americans, that is, immigrants from Mexico.

Procedure

Letters describing the interview as a "conversation with a student about your family and children" and urging participation were mailed to all selected respondents. Those parents who received letters were later called by telephone to schedule appointments. During the telephone conversation, it was explained that the interview or conversation would involve one parent, not both, and a student. Those parents who did not have telephones or who did not wish to give us their telephone numbers were contacted personally.

Interviewing was carried on during the four-week period between June 26 and July 21, 1974, having been preceded by a one week training course which involved familiarization with the interview schedule, role-playing, and practice interviews with parents who were not eligible to participate in the study but who wished to be interviewed.

Eleven undergraduate college students acted as interviewers; five Mexican-Americans who were bi-lingual and six Anglo-Americans. Mexican-American respondents were interviewed by Mexican-American interviewers to ensure that respondents who preferred to speak Spanish were able to do so. Interviewers read each item to respondents and coded all responses. Only one parent in each family was present during the interview. The sessions ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1½ hours.

Interview

The interview was presented in three sections in the following order: (a) background information, which consisted of 43 questions concerning the number of children, the family's religious affiliation, the number of years of formal education of each parent, the occupation of each parent, and the languages spoken in the home, the country of birth, etc.; (b) attitudes toward close family ties, which consisted of 13 Likert-type items; and (c) parent-child relations including 85 questions concerning the rules the child is expected to follow, child's chores, the parent's ways of punishing and rewarding the child, and so on. The questions were designed to be answered with reference to a young child with at least one year of school experience; therefore, each family in the sample had to have at least one child between the ages of six and twelve years.

Results and Discussion

Despite an attempt to institute a nonstatistical control for socioeconomic status by selecting respondents from the same neighborhoods (i.e. areas with houses of similar age and cost), Anglo-Americans were significantly better educated than their Mexican-American counterparts (wives, $t(260) = 7.49$, $p < .001$; husbands, $t(239) = 5.73$, $p < .001$) and had significantly higher average socioeconomic status ($t(259) = 3.72$, $p < .001$), a weighted combination of the husband's education and occupational levels (Hollingshead, 1959). To assess the effects of cultural background on each of two sets of items, one set selected to measure attitudes toward close family relations and the other set selected to measure parental encouragement of dependence, multivariate analyses of variance were performed using socioeconomic status as a covariate.

The analyses confirmed that Mexican-American parents felt close family relations were more important than did Anglo-Americans, multivariate $F(6,252= 2.66, p < .001)$. All measures of family-centeredness produced highly significant univariates F's for cultural background. Compared with Anglo-Americans, Mexican-American parents agreed more strongly with statements indicating they (a) enjoyed talking with their parents, $F(1,257)= 2.16, p < .02$, (b) their relatives had warm and friendly feelings toward one another, $F(1,257)= 10.26, p < .001$, (c) a child's best friend should be his/her brother or sister, $F(1,257)= 6.63, p < .001$, (d) the family's reputation in the neighborhood is important, $F(1,257)= 2.19, p < .02$, and (e) loyalty to family members is very important, regardless of whether the relative is right or wrong, $F(1,257)= 1.16, p < .03$. In addition, Mexican-American parents visited their relatives more often than did the Anglo-Americans, $F(1,257)= 2.28, p < .02$.

Mexican-American parents tended to encourage their children's dependence on the family unit and obedience to authority more than Anglo-American parents, multivariate $F(8,250)= 2.74, p < .001$. Mexican-American parents compared with Anglo-Americans, (a) less often allowed their child to bring friends home to play, $F(1,257)= 7.97, p < .001$, (b) required their children to play closer to home, $F(1,257)= 7.06, p < .001$, (c) worried more when their children were not at home, $F(1,257)= 3.46, p < .006$, and (d) allowed the child to make fewer small decisions such as what to wear and when to go to bed, $F(1,257)= 5.18, p < .002$. Compared with Anglo-Americans, Mexican-American parents expressed more disapproval when their child argued with authority figures such as teachers, $F(1,257)= 5.40, p < .001$, or interrupted adult conversations, $F(1,257)= 6.51, p < .001$.

In summary, results suggest that Mexican-Americans do display patterns of childrearing and family attitudes significantly different from those of Anglo-Americans and consistent with their Mexican cultural background. After

controlling for differences in socioeconomic status, Mexican-American parents in contrast with their Anglo-American neighbors, held more family-centered attitudes, reflecting a greater concern for maintaining close, warm relationships within the family, and appear to encourage similar family-centered attitudes and behaviors in their children by requiring them to play close to home with siblings and to respect the authority of their elders.

By way of caution, it should be noted that the present study required a high level of cooperation from respondents and that the sample included only intact families where both parents were of the same cultural background. Further, the respondents were mostly women. Since the sample is, therefore, likely to have a disproportionate number of the more stable and verbally fluent members of both cultural communities, generalizations must be restricted accordingly.

Conclusions

Nonetheless our findings are of interest to psychologists studying Mexican-Americans for several reasons: First, we have begun to identify cultural differences in childrearing practices which do not appear to be accounted for by differences in education, occupation, or socioeconomic status. Second, although research by Kagan, Madsen, and their colleagues have documented the effects of cultural background, urbanization, and socioeconomic differences on the social motives of Mexican, Mexican-American, and Anglo-American children, researchers have just begun to define the variables which mediate between cultural background and social motives. Recent reviews of cross-cultural research by Triandis, Malpass, and Davidson (1973) and Whiting (Note 1) have urged psychologists to begin to unravel "packaged" variables such as cultural background and socioeconomic status in order to delineate more carefully the causal links between such demographic variables on the one hand, and attitudes and behaviors on the other. It is hoped that the present research along with the

probing analyses of Kagan (Note 2) and Hoppe (Note 3), also reported at this conference, will stimulate greater interest in unpacking Mexican cultural background.

Finally, although some critics may suggest that the findings reported create a negative image of the Mexican-American family, it is our opinion that the ability of Mexican-Americans to maintain a warm and supportive family life in the hard-driving, achievement oriented American culture should be cause for respect and reflection. A renewal of the American middle-class family may well profit from analysis of the Mexican-American family.

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